

THE FORSTER FAMILY IN PETALUMA

by Margaret Forster Sobel, July 18, 1994

The first Forster to come to Sonoma County was my father's uncle, David Forster, who left Co. Monaghan, Ireland, sometime around the turn of the century, intending to join the gold prospectors going to Alaska. On the ship to New York he met Lucy Smythe who was coming to San Francisco where she had cousins by the name of Sharpe. Uncle David's courtship of Lucy continued on the transcontinental train, and they married in San Francisco. Instead of going to Alaska, Uncle David worked for W. & J. Sloane which was already established in San Francisco. After the earthquake and fire of 1906 he and Lucy moved to a prune ranch they bought on Petaluma Hill Road.

Through these years Uncle David was writing to my father, David John Forster, his namesake, that he should think of emigrating to California, but David John was needed on the farm at Tattybrack, a townland between Cootehill and Ballybay in Co. Monaghan. They raised horses for the continental armies. Besides, he was courting Annie Jane Hawthorne of nearby Mt. Carmel.

A month after he turned 21, David John went with his father to Aughnamullen Church to sign the famous Ulster League and Covenant of September 28, 1912, along with a great number of others who opposed the Bill which had recently been passed by the House of Lords for a Home Rule Parliament for Ireland. Partly

owing to the opposition expressed by this Covenant and partly owing to the refusal of British Army officers stationed in Ireland to put down this opposition by force, implementation of the vote was postponed until after World War I. (The Protestant organization, the Loyal Orange Lodge, was also active during this period, but the Forsters of Tattybrack considered this activity unsuitable for land-owners.)

In 1916, feeling his father's yoke, David John left home and went to Belfast to join the British Flying Corps, then the most romantic of units fighting in France. Two older sisters living there persuaded him to look instead for work that would give him the independence he needed to marry Annie Jane. So he became a steward at Langford Lodge, the Co. Antrim estate of the Pakenham family. In 1918, he returned to Co. Monaghan to marry Annie Jane and bring her to the house he'd earned on the estate. I was born there in 1920.

In the years after the Armistice of 1918, the process for implementing the Bill for Home Rule began, and a vicious civil war ushered in the Irish Free State. This unrest caused David John and Annie Jane to look more favorably on Uncle David's repeated invitations to come to California.

In the autumn of 1921, David John moved Annie Jane and baby to her family at Mt. Carmel and made the trip to California alone.

He found work at the G. P. McNear Company, and eight months later, in May 1922, Mother and I joined him. Earlier that month,

Dad had admired Marjorie Park who was that year's Queen of the Egg Day Festival. Marjorie seemed to my parents an easier name than the Jeanette Margaret they had given me, and calling me Marjorie seemed a proper tribute to the Egg Basket that was to be their home.

For the following three years we lived on a small rented chicken ranch near Cotati, and Dad drove to work at McNear's in his first Model-T Ford. My sister Florence May was born in that house in 1923. I remember Uncle David visiting us there, a childless widower by then. Aunt Lucy had died of cancer, a disease then spoken of only in whispers.

In 1925, Dad bought from Mr. McNear the chicken ranch on Grant Avenue, then just outside the southwest city limits of Petaluma. I remember well the Sunday in 1926 when my brother Stanley Victor was born there, delivered by Dr. Henry S. Rogers. Dad had by then left McNear's and become a full-time chicken rancher, raising chicks in two brooder houses, selling off the roosters, and keeping the laying hens in three large chicken houses with three separate adjoining yards. We also had a cow which my mother milked, so we always had good milk and cream and butter. Dad kept one field in hay for the cow, another for kale for the chickens, and a fine vegetable garden with fruit trees for us. Water for the house came from a Petaluma city line, but water for all outside uses — chickens, cow, garden — was pumped from two wells, one of which gave out in the '30s. Another well and pumphouse, on the corner of Grant and Mountain View Avenues,

belonged to our neighbors, the Goodwins, whose house was on the opposite side of us on Grant Avenue. The Goodwin house still stands.

I started school in August 1927, walking with other San Antone School District children the two miles to Lincoln Primary School. My teachers there were Mrs. Stewart, the principal, Miss Entrekin (to whose second grade class I was moved to be with my age group), and Miss Matzenbaugh, a world traveller, it seemed, whose spelling bees, usually boys against girls, were great fun. When President Herbert Hoover was inaugurated, the whole school heard him take the oath over a radio set up on the stage of the school auditorium.

We moved on then to fourth, fifth, and sixth grades at Washington Grammar School. By this time San Antone children could ride the Petaluma District's school buses — if we walked up to the high school on Fair Street. It was when we were in Mrs. Lepori's fourth grade class that I experienced my first solar eclipse. I can still see the crescent images under the trees on the asphalt surface of the playground.

In those grammar school years I begged for a piano, and we went to Sherman and Clay in San Francisco to buy an upright which I have still. We were told it would be crated and shipped up the Petaluma River on the Steamer Gold on a certain day. Sure enough, about noon that day we heard the Steamer Gold's whistle sounding up Mountain View Avenue from the river as it approached the town, and an hour or so later Petaluma Draying's truck

unloaded it at our house.

We three children attended Sunday School at the first Presbyterian Church where our parents were active members. Dad was Clerk of Session there for many years. He helped to organize the Loyalist Irish of Petaluma, not a very great number, into an Orange Lodge which gave them a social center through the '20s and '30s. I think that wartime responsibilities and inevitable aging, along with unresponsive children, led finally to the L.O.L.'s fading away.

In the early years on Grant Avenue, we children helped in small ways with the raising of chickens. In the '30s, when egg prices dropped low, the work increased because great care had to be taken to produce the cleanest eggs for the best price. That was when Dad fixed fine-grained sand paper on sheepskin-faced shoe-buffers, and we learned how to sand the eggs lightly to remove soil. The outside edges of our left-hand fingernails got sanded away. (When we played jacks at Washington Grammar School on the cement apron outside the Girls' entrance, it was our right-hand fingernails that suffered, but we were younger then and it didn't matter so much.)

Low egg prices led Dad into selling automobile and fire insurance for the State Farm Insurance Companies. He managed to run the ranch and sell insurance between feeding and egg-gathering times. Later he did his business by phone during the day so that I could use his Rockne to drive, with four friends, to 8-5 classes at Santa Rosa Junior College. Then he'd make

calls on policy-holders in the evening. My mother, too, learned how to calm hysterical drivers who had had accidents.

When World War II began, Dad gradually sold off the chickens because, in addition to his insurance agency, he became a watchman at Mare Island Navy Yard. After the war he sold off a few lots for house-building on the Mountain View side of the Grant Avenue place, took an office in town and worked at insurance full time until he retired in 1976 at age 85. After my mother died in 1963, he married Lil Halvorsen, sold the Grant Avenue property, and moved to the house her late husband had built on Old Adobe Road. He died in 1988, in his 97th year.

My sister Florence's first husband, Russell Donogh, a U.S. Army officer in World War II, was killed in the Philippine Islands early in 1945. She later married David McClure King of Waugh District, whose mother Elizabeth McClure was born on Point Reyes (now a national seashore). Several Irish families, including the McClures, had found the land and climate much like Ireland. Some McClures have leased back their land on Point Reyes, and cousins of the McClures, the McDowells, still have a dairy ranch near Petaluma on the Bodega Highway. [According to Florence, the doctor who attended Elizabeth's birth on Point Reyes came by boat from Marshall, across the Bay. When the children, including Elizabeth, were ready for school the McClures moved to the corner of Old Adobe and Corona Roads. Later their cousins, still living at Point Reyes, came to stay with Elizabeth and her family to attend high school in Petaluma. They took the

electric train into town. M.D.]

My brother Stanley met his future wife Jeannette Rinn in Petaluma High School during World War II. Stanley served in the U.S. Navy at the end of the war, retired after many years as an underwriter with Farmers Exchange Insurance in Merced, Illinois, and Los Angeles, and died in 1990 in Moorpark, Ventura Co., where Jeanette still lives.

I met my husband Eli Sobel in a class at U.C. Berkeley in 1941, which was taught by the famous folklorist Archer Taylor. One requirement for the course was to write a paper on freshly-gathered folklore — folk beliefs, superstitions, or tales and legends told in families or distinct social groups. I settled on finding what I could among the Irish I knew in Petaluma. (Incidentally, I took Eli along to meet my family on my first collection trip at Thanksgiving. When Eli, who had recently come from years in Alabama, saw the feathers of White Leghorns blown into windrows along fences on a before-turkey ride, he thought he was seeing cotton-growing land, like November in the South.)

It took three trips to Petaluma to loosen tongues and stir memories of the kind of material I needed for my folklore paper. Taylor published the result in the California Folklore Quarterly.* What was most interesting to me was that I had never heard any of these legends and charms before I asked for them. The families I interviewed (Forster, Hawthorne, Kelly) plainly had felt no need to preserve the commonplaces of their former home. Petaluma was a new land, a new life.

To us children, too, it was a paradise. To walk home from school along I Street was to find Johnny-jump-ups and to gather pussy-willows beside San Antone Creek. Sometimes we'd have a penny to buy candy at Jones Dairy on Eighth Street. I'm sorry for Ireland's present troubles, but I'm very glad that the troubles of 75 years ago sent me to Petaluma.

*Folklore of County Monaghan, Ireland, Twenty Years Later,
California Folklore Quarterly, pp. 309-314, Volume II, No. 4,
October 1943, University of California Press.

July 12, 1994

PETALUMA HISTORICAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM
Oral History Program
Family History Questionnaire

	Name	Birthdate	Birthplace	Deceased? Date
Parents*	David John Forster	1891	Co Monaghan, Ireland	1988
	Annie Jane Hawthorne	1891	Co. Monaghan, Ireland	1963

	Name	Birthdate	Birthplace	Deceased? Date
Brothers & Sisters	Florence May King	1923	Cotati, CA	
	Stanley Victor Forster	1926	Petaluma, CA	1991

	Name	Birthdate	Birthplace	Deceased? Date
Grand-parents*	Robert Forster	4/23/1856	Ireland	10/3/1936
	Mary Anne Mehaffey	6/12/1866	Ireland	10/1952
	Alexander Hawthorne		Ireland	1930
	Margaret Moorehead		Ireland	1928

	Name	Birthdate	Birthplace	Deceased? Date
Spouse	Eli Sobel	1/17/15	New York, N.Y.	4/1/87

	Name	Birthdate	Birthplace	Deceased? Date
Children	Jeffrey Abbott Sobel	8/19/51	Los Angeles, CA	

Grandchildren

*Please include maiden name of mother and grandmothers.

THANK YOU!

PETALUMA HISTORICAL LIBRARY AND MUSEUM
Oral History Program
Narrator Personal Information Questionnaire

Name Sobel Margaret Forster
Last First Middle (Maiden)

Address 2207 Kelton Avenue
Los Angeles, California 90064

Marital status: Married _____ Single _____ Divorced _____ Widowed X

Birthdate July 11, 1920 Birthplace Crumlin, Co. Antrim, Ireland

Length of residence in Petaluma (or Sonoma County) May 1922 - December 1944

Education: Elementary school Lincoln Primary School + Washington Grammar School
Petaluma Junior High School 1935

Secondary school Petaluma High School Grad 1938

Santa Rosa Junior College, A.A. 1940

College University of California, Berkeley Grad AB, 1942

Other _____ " _____ " _____ " Cert. in French 1943

Occupation(s) or former occupations(s) Teacher of English and French in

Petaluma Junior High School 1943-1944 and in

Claremont Junior High School, Oakland, CA, 1945-46;

Secretary in charge of UCLA office of the University of California Press, 1946-51.

Travels United Kingdom + Germany 18-20 mos. on 10 trips.

Other countries of Western Europe briefly.

Organizations, clubs UCLA Emeriti Association, UCLA Faculty

Women's Club, UCLA Faculty Center Association, Temple Isaiah.

Other special interests Birdwatching, Book review group

Additional comments _____

THANK YOU!

PETALUMA HISTORICAL MUSEUM
Oral History Program

Unconditional Release Agreement

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In addition to the rights and authority given to you under the preceeding paragraph, I hereby authorize you to edit, publish, sell and/or license the use of my oral history memoir in any other manner which the Museum considers to be desirable and I waive any claim to any payments which may be received as a consequence thereof by the Museum.

PLACE

Los Angeles, California

DATE

July 12, 1994

Margaret F. Sobel
(Interviewee)

(for the Petaluma Historical Museum)